1:Stanford U. S-4, 5 1956 AF12 North China AF12

G. Narrative and Song Recitations

545 Public entertainment in North China also includes narrative and song recitations with percussion and string accompaniment. This is called ku-tz'u or ch'ü-i. Since they are informally staged, they are more adaptable to new content, and the singer or narrator is free to give his own version of the moral of the story. Most of the singers and narrators obtain their stories and verses from old novels. Now the Chinese Communists have encouraged them to use the new novels, such as Brother and Sister in Land-clearing and the Marriage of Hsiao-erh-hei, and they are encouraged to compose their own texts. Han Ch'i-hsiang and Wang Chung-san are the two ch'ü-i artists most praised by the Communists.

536 It should be mentioned that the Communists have elevated the social position of actors and actresses from that of "entertainers" to that of "artists." Actors and actresses have their own organizations in the capital and are invited to take part in the deliberation of new policies pertaining to their profession "under the leadership of the Party."

III. ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

534. Painting and the Plastic Arts

When one talks of painting in Communist China one is immediately reminded of Ch'i

532 Pai-shih of North China. Ch'i is now 95 years old. He paints flowers, insects, and small animals in their customary surroundings. He uses water color but often accentuates the lines and movements with ink. Although simple in composition, his paintings are invariably fresh and full of life.

Ch'i has the habit of using only a part of his canvas, allowing enough room to add a sentence or two to epitomize the meaning of the composition, as do other traditional artists. His calligraphy, with its rugged and carefree appearance, is equally unique.

The Communists have paid great respect to Ch'i Pai-shih, proclaiming him "the People's artist" because he was once a Peking carpenter and woodcarver. He has been free to choose his subject matter and to compose his paintings as he wishes. Some times he will oblige the Communists by prefacing his paintings with an explanatory phrase "It's done for the occasion of the anniversary of the People's Republic," or by painting a dove accompanied by the characters ho-p'ing (peace).

Ch'i has so high a standing among those who are initiated in the art of Chinese brush painting that his mere residing and painting in Communist China are already an asset to the regime, and the regime has found it unnecessary to press him to turn out propaganda pieces,

532as is expected of younger and lesser known artists.

Painting and the plastic arts are largely utilitarian in China today. The utilitarian spirit puts them either in the realm of propaganda or craftsmanship. As propaganda, they become extremely derivative and stereotyped; as craftsmanship, they utilize local characteristics and traditional skills, although they sometimes appear to be unrestrainedly florid and pretentious, Chinese brush paintings, woodcuts, oil paintings, pencil sketches, water colors, sculpture, ceramic figures, woodcarvings, cartoons, and chalk drawings are entries in most of the art exhibitions. Among these categories, ceramic figures and woodcarvings represent local craftsmanship and are little influenced by Communist ideology. Other art forms have used Communist policies and slogans as themes for depiction. Woodcuts, sculptures, and water colors seem to have been more easily adapted to the new themes than oil paintings and the traditional Chinese brush paintings. The oil paintings done by the Chinese artists lack imagination in composition; at their best, they are only photographic depictions of political activities. Traditional brush painting technique is at its best in landscape paintings and in depicting rural life and is ill-adapted to the illustration of modern people and their activities. No prominent artists in oil or water color have emerged under the Communist regime.

532 Under the general principle, "Accept the heritage of the world," artists like Rembrandt and Leonardo da Vinci are commemorated and reproductions like that of Mona Lisa are used in literary and art journals.

B. Woodcuts

The woodcut, a traditional art in China, is used to adorn story books. Lu Hsün was the first to renew popular interest in this art. Woodcuts became popular in Yenan during the war against Japan because their creation does not require elaborate equipment. Many people remember the lively woodcuts of the Liberated Areas, which showed the influence of Western woodcuts. Woodcuts are popular in Communist China; there is a tendency to incorporate the traditional Chinese woodcut style in the illustration of Communist themes, and there are elaborate woodcuts in multiple colors, the technique of which antedates the Yenan period. In recent woodcuts, rural life is more effectively presented than blast furnaces or anti-US activities.

C. New Year's Pictures (Nien-hua)

532
537 In those Chinese households which have not been influenced by the West, a new picture is hung or pasted on the wall on every New Year's Eve to assure a prosperous and peaceful year ahead. The pictures are called

532 nien-hua. New Year's pictures are exploited
529 by the Communists as a means to secure people's consent and support for their regime. The traditional theme of superstitious propitiation to gods has been transmogrified to praise of Mao Tse-tung for bringing happiness and prosperity to the people, to celebration of the Long March of the Red Army, the distribution of land certificates after the land reform, the woman train-conductor, or the "great meeting of Stalin and Mao Tse-tung."[21]

The Communists have boasted of a tremendous sale of the "new" nien-hua in the last few years. The production and printing of the nien-hua are now done entirely by Communist publishing houses, and the Chinese people have no way of buying their traditional nien-hua. The aesthetic value of the nien-hua is practically nil, but it utilizes so well the traditional customs, beliefs, and sayings of the people that its messages are immediately understandable and are apt to be accepted.

D. Comic Strips (Lien-huan T'u-hua)

532

The Chinese comic strip is neither literature nor art, but it borrows a little from both to enable the barely literate to entertain themselves with stories. The Communists, knowing the popularity of comic strips among children, women, and the uneducated, have contrived to make them instruments to teach "patriotism," sanitation, and

21. People's Pictorial, February 1951.

532 health. They regard earlier comic strips as "feudalistic" and superstitious, and have replaced them with those which are "new, healthy, and educational." The new comic strips, created by artists recruited and guided by the Communists, are seen at street corners and in factories, villages, armies, and schools.

The Communists claim that the sale of comic strips is increasing daily. The Lien-ho Bookstore in Shanghai, which handles the new comic strips, reports the sale of more than 600,000 volumes in January 1951, and more than one million volumes in the following April. The comic strip periodical Lien-huan Hua-pao is reported to have a circulation of 400,000 copies.

The most representative and most publicized new comic strip is The Letter with a Chicken Feather,[22] which uses 243 pictures to give the Chinese children a patriotic education." The story concerns a young boy who, after receiving a Communist education, successfully fulfilled the "heroic" task of delivering an important message to anti-Japanese guerrilla force. It is claimed that more than 58,000 copies of The Letter with a Chicken Feather have been sold.

---

22. It was a traditional practice to include a chicken feather with an urgent message, to signify the letter's importance and the need for safekeeping.